

On a Mission in Madison Square

By: Andy Guy



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Since moving to Grand Rapids in 1993, David Allen has started three nonprofit organizations and helped lead the stunning transformation of the Madison Square district. The redevelopment guru talks about serving as a catalyst for change, how he measures success, reinvesting in inner city schools, and barbeque.

You started your career in the grocery business, how did you get involved in community rebuilding?

I had a call to go into ministry. Eventually I decided that I was going to plant a church. And I knew it was going to be an urban church. I love city life. But if you're going to do urban ministry, you have to affect housing, jobs, kids, schools. It's all interconnected. I believe urban churches cannot simply exist in their neighborhood, like a commuter church. Urban churches must engage the issues of their neighborhood to be effective.



So we founded [Oakdale Neighbors](#), and did some organizing, started a bike shop with kids where we fixed up bikes and sold them, we started a candy shop. We started dealing with real estate, working with landlords, acquired a vacant commercial property and fixed it up. And

we saw the change that could make. I learned if you weren't affecting the real estate, you weren't really changing the neighborhood

You play a number of roles in the community – nonprofit director, elected leader, etc. – how do you view yourself? As an organizer, a politician, an activist?

I like to view myself as a catalyst. I'm all those things. But, as a catalyst, whatever situation I'm in, I'm always asking how I can help make the situation run better or have more impact. Sometimes, to be a catalyst, you have to put that bull's eye on and say 'OK, we're going to do this. Full speed ahead.' Sometimes you don't. Sometimes you sit back and shut up and provide guidance. It's knowing when to use which gift. And I'm still learning that balance.

How do you measure success in your work?

I've come to be more scientific in how I view what I determine as success. I can easily spout out how we've done this many units of housing, or this many new businesses, this many jobs, or this many real estate lots. But that absolutely does not determine success. As a catalyst for change, I try and find creative ways to measure how each piece that I'm involved in effects the other things. I try and determine cause and effect.

Can you give an example?

When we started working real significantly in this neighborhood nearly three years ago we completed a door-to-door survey. It asked some real simple questions but got some profound answers about 'how do you feel about your neighborhood,' 'how do others feel about the neighborhood,' 'do you feel safe in your neighborhood.' Those sorts of things.

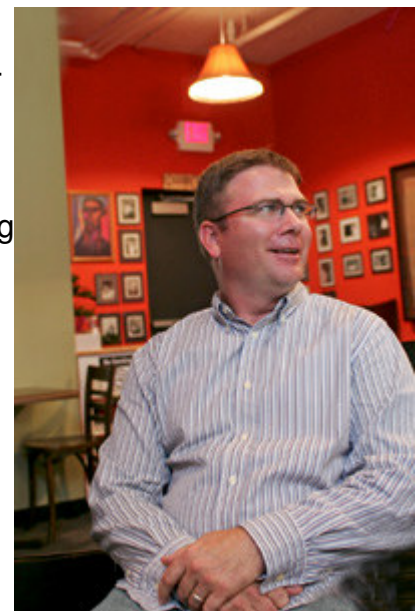
Each year now we go back and ask those questions again and the change has been remarkable. Two years ago only 30 percent of the people had a positive viewpoint of this neighborhood, and a significant number of folks felt like this neighborhood was never going to change. That indicated a strong sense of hopelessness. We just finished the most recent survey and 60 percent now have a very positive viewpoint of the neighborhood. Not one person felt it wasn't going to change.

Public opinion is important. But you can measure your work in hard numbers too, right?

Since 2002, we've done about \$8 million in development. This year alone we'll do \$10 million. We run the gamut of redevelopment. Lead abatement projects. New development. Home rehabs. The whole spectrum. [Lighthouse Communities](#) is not just an affordable housing provider. This year alone we'll work on 200 units of housing

What have been the keys to achieving that success?

Intentionally using local suppliers and contractors. Raising the bar with respect to the quality of work that is performed in the neighborhood. I'd also say, for me personally, moving into the neighborhood. And making the issues of the neighborhood my



issues. It's not people from the outside coming in trying to change the neighborhood. It's a 'we' thing. Almost every member of my staff at Lighthouse Communities lives in the neighborhood.

You've served as a school board member since 2002. And GRPS is building a new middle school just down the street from your flat. How important is the reinvestment in and success of the public school system to the city's renaissance?

The new schools in general that we're building are going to have a massive impact on neighborhoods. We haven't done a significant building campaign in probably 50 years. We haven't seen this in a generation. Look at enrollment in each our new schools where there is 100 students more than what we thought. They are all almost at capacity. That speaks volumes. The new buildings will go a long ways toward revitalizing the school system. And if we revitalize the school system, we'll accelerate the revitalization of our neighborhoods.

You're the chef in the family. What's your specialty?

I'm pretty good at Middle Eastern. Butter Chicken. Saag. I like to do Italian and Mexican. Barbeque is my specialty. Ribs and Chicken. I also brew beer. I'd like to open a restaurant some day.

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Photos:

David Allen at home in his Madison Square kitchen

David Allen accepts a Cool Cities Grant on behalf of Lighthouse Communities

David Allen at the Urban Beanery Cafe, one of several businesses helping to transform Madison Square.